

As so many people grieve for the deaths of family members, friends, and neighbors in this community, it seems Ash Wednesday could not come at a better time.

For myself, every Ash Wednesday takes me back to the Ash Wednesday that came shortly after I had been diagnosed with cancer. I was in my first year of seminary, 36 years old, with two preschool children. I was bald and tired from the chemo, wondering whether I would be one of the many women who undergo treatment and go on to live a long and healthy life, or whether I would be one of the women who undergo treatment and die young. Would I have the chance to practice the ministry I was preparing for? Would my daughter's childhood consist of seeing their mother go through the end stages of a terminal illness?

Some people said they knew I would be fine because I had faith. Some people said they knew I would be fine because I had a positive attitude. But I knew people with faith and a positive attitude who had died, and I knew people with no faith and a lousy attitude who had lived into a grumpy old age.

Some of my friends and family asked, "Why did this cancer happen to you?" I had no risk factors, no family history. I ate my vegetables. I exercised. The real answer to the question, "Why did this happen?" is "Illness happens because human beings are mortal." The real answer to the question, "Why did this death happen?" is "Death happens because we are mortal."

So as I walked to the front of the chapel on that Ash Wednesday, bald and tired from the chemo, with tears streaming down my face, I was sad. And I was also relieved that in the middle of a culture that tries to suggest that we can overcome aging and death by "being strong" or "staying positive," the church was the one place honest enough to tell me the truth about my mortality: "remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." And as I walked back to my pew, and saw the ashes on other people's foreheads, I remembered that each of them is dust, each of them will return to dust. The ones I admired. The ones I envied. The ones I cared deeply for. The ones who got on my nerves. The old, the young, the sick, the well. Remember that they are dust, and to dust they shall return.

And every Ash Wednesday since has made the ritual more poignant. Last Ash Wednesday, our parishioner George Mahaffey, suffering from terminal cancer, came forward for the imposition of ashes. As he stood at the altar rail, his hands automatically did what they were accustomed to do over a long lifetime of worship, they extended forward to receive the sacrament of communion. In a moment, he remembered, and put his hands down. But putting those ashes on the forehead of someone who knew that it was probably his last Ash Wednesday on earth felt to me very much like a sacramental moment. And now, instead of receiving a wafer, George is feasting at the heavenly banquet.

I used to think it was odd to have two different things going on at the same service: is the focus of Ash Wednesday confession of our sins or is the focus our mortality? But the more I experience this solemn day, the more connections between the two seem meaningful. When we realize how fragile our very existence is, it is hard to be arrogant about how important or powerful we are. When we realize the fragility of the existence of the people around us, it helps us to judge them a little less harshly, to take them for granted a little less, to forgive them a little more readily, to love them a little more gently.

When someone we love dies, we can feel that an injustice has been done to us. That God has cheated us out of time with that person that we think we were entitled to. Anger is a normal part of the grieving process. And yet if we stay too long in the anger, we may miss something of tremendous value: the deep gratitude that comes from the awareness that every day is a gift from God. The deep gratitude that comes from the awareness that each person we love is a gift from God, each person who loves us is a gift from God. The deep gratitude for each opportunity we have to love and to work, to rest and to celebrate, all of which are gifts God showers on us far beyond any entitlement a mortal could claim.

Yes, death and suffering happen. Yes, life and joy happen. Paradoxically, the more we accept that death and suffering are part of life, the more we can find life and joy even in the middle of mortality, pain, loss, and grief. As 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians puts it, "As servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God...in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see, we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed, as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, as poor, yet making many rich, as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

You have heard the proverb, "that which doesn't kill us makes us stronger." But the good news of this Ash Wednesday is, "that which does kill us also makes us stronger." Death is not God abandoning us, or abandoning the people we love. In God's promise of the resurrection, each of us is set free from all the limitations of our mortal life: we are set free from every impatience or neglect, every pettiness or failure to love; in heaven, we go from strength to strength. Jesus comes to earth to tell us about the blessedness of heaven and the eternal love of God, but even more important than that, Jesus tells us that we have the opportunity to experience that heavenly love on earth. Jesus tells us in today's gospel what doesn't matter: it doesn't matter whether other people think you're generous; it doesn't matter whether other people think you're holy, it doesn't matter whether other people think you're successful. What matters is that you give, you pray, you bear suffering, you store up treasures in heaven. And in doing so, you find what a treasure your life on earth is.

So remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. And remember that

you have a little bit of time left on earth, which God has given to you.

**“Life is short. We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. Be swift to love; make haste to be kind.”**

Give thanks for heaven and for earth, for each gift God gives you in life, and in death, and in eternal life.